

History of Highland Hospitals

The Inverness (Forbes) Dispensary Huntly Street 1832



Scotland's first dispensary, the Edinburgh Royal Public Dispensary, opened in 1776 and, by the 1830s, several Scottish towns had one in place. In October 1832, the Committee for the Interests of the Poor on the Green of Muirtown opened a Dispensary at 44 Huntly Streetⁱ which became very important to the health care of the poorer people of Inverness having made over 100,000 treatments by 1925. The Dispensary was 'for bestowing medicines gratuitously to the sick poor' and also targeted those such as tradesmen and labourers who risked destitution when they fell ill. It carried out vaccinations and minor operations. It also received donations of food and other necessities which it distributed to impoverished families.

When the Dispensary opened, it employed a 'resident porter/attendant'. His job was to assist a local medical practitioner who carried out regular

ⁱ Street numbers changed over the years - it is listed as at 37 Huntly St in the Inverness Directory of 1873. It seems to be the same site as today.

History of Highland Hospitals

surgeries and home visits and gave his services free of charge.ⁱ The attendant also dispensed medicines. By 1836, there was an assistant porter but this post may not have continued. In 1837, a paid medical attendant was appointed but seems to have been discontinued in the 1840s because of funding difficulties.

There was a large initial demand. In the first year there were 1159 treatments of which 27% were visited at home and 28% were surgical. Over 60% of the patients were female and, interestingly, only 14% were over 60 years old perhaps reflecting the relative short life expectancy of the poor at this time. 34 children were inoculated with cowpoxⁱⁱ and this level continued for many years. The Dispensary opened in time for the first cholera outbreak (that same year) and it was later said to have taken 'the principal charge of the medical arrangements' during the 1834 outbreak. Then, it had 30 dispensers of medicine at 16 stations across the Burgh and was open day and nightⁱⁱⁱ for 8 weeks during the outbreak. It treated 533 cholera sufferers of which 47 died.¹

The Dispensary was initially managed by a committee of 15 subscribers, three taken from each of five districts the idea being that they would know the potential clients and be able to recommend them for treatment as well as be a focus for collecting subscriptions and donations. This system of collection seems to have only lasted for a few years at most although it was revived several times without much success. The management structure also seems to have changed and, by 1840, the local MP was patron, a senior minister was president and all the councillors, magistrates, clergy etc. of the Burgh were managers. In 1843, there was a committee of 32 although it appears that, after a few years, few attended the AGMs (annual general meetings) which were very small gatherings. This lack of interest extended elsewhere, for example, the clergy seemed unable most years to persuade their congregations to donate.

ⁱ An honorarium was usually granted.

ⁱⁱ An early vaccine against smallpox.

ⁱⁱⁱ From the start there was an on-call service at night.

History of Highland Hospitals

After the Dispensary opened, the out-patient dispensary service at the Infirmary reduced considerably. Like voluntary hospitals elsewhere, the Infirmary welcomed this development which reduced their expenditure. At the first AGM, the Dispensary managers stressed that they were not in competition with the Infirmaryⁱ which was too far away from most of the potential clients of the Dispensary especially in winter.ⁱⁱ Over the years, the Dispensary promoters were careful to regularly highlight its distinct contribution to the health of the Burgh - unlike the Infirmary it had a drop-in facility and made home visits. Later, the promoters stressed the financial saving to the Parochial Board of helping to combat pauperism. However, this did not prevent some unfavourable comparison with the Infirmary from some members of the Burgh council over the years.²

It is apparent that, in the stratified society of 19th century Inverness, the Dispensary dealt with many cases which would not have been considered by the Infirmary. However, the potential funding came from the class which would not have required the Dispensary's services and, even with the nominal support of the Burgh establishment, it was hard to secure funding in the 1840s. For a number of years, the Dispensary was on the point of closing. It accumulated debts, meetings were poorly attended and the collection system broke down. Eventually, in 1849 (the same year as the return of cholera), the Burgh rallied. Subscriptions and donations were collected including substantial church collections which put the Dispensary on a more even keel from then on although there were still some financial difficulties in the 1850s. Unlike the Infirmary where ongoing medical advances were costly to implement, the Dispensary's facilities and staffing were essentially stable and remained that way.

Initially, the Dispensary rented its accommodation but, by the 1860s, it was seeking new premises. The accounts showed a surplus and, in 1861,

ⁱ The Dispensary regularly referred patients to the Infirmary.

ⁱⁱ Unlike the Infirmary, the Dispensary confined its work to the Burgh and Parish.

History of Highland Hospitals

a donation of £500 provided sufficient funds for a new building. In 1868, the new Dispensary was built apparently on the same site which had also been recently occupied by Mr Whyte, photographer. Architects were Matthews and Lawrie and contractors were Anderson - builders from Grantown, Mackenzie - carpenter, Russell - slater, MacKay - plumber, Cameron - plasterer and Ross - painter. The consulting rooms were on the ground floor with the resident attendant's flat above. It cost £700 and was funded entirely by subscriptions and donations.³

Out-patient numbers

1835	1,642
1841	418
1848	476
1854	474
1860	558
1864	626
1870	973
1873	930
1892	2,517
1894	3,642
1895	3,418
1898	2,200
1900	1,942
1904	1,433
1906	1,703
1910	1,861
1913	1,774
1920	1,644
1923	950
1929	787

In 1880, Dr George Geddes Forbesⁱ endowed £6,000 to the Dispensary on condition that it be named the Forbes Dispensary in recognition that the Dispensary had been 'founded chiefly' by Dr Forbes' brother, William Welsh Forbes.ⁱⁱ The endowment was to pay for qualified medical staffing and Alexander Mitchell,ⁱⁱⁱ pharmacist from Portree, was appointed resident dispenser. Until then, the resident dispenser was not required to have any medical qualification although, by the mid-1860s, a knowledge of dispensing medicines was required along with the ability to speak Gaelic and someone with a military background continued to be preferred. The position of a local doctor as honorary medical attendant continued but it seems that an honorarium was now paid (£100 in 1880) and there

was often a competitive annual election for medical officer. Under Dr Forbes' endowment conditions, a trust was formed with the Inverness Provost, four bailies, the local MP and the minister of the West Church

ⁱ Surgeon Major Forbes of Millburn (died 1881) served in the Bombay Army and also donated the Forbes Memorial Fountain on Ness Bank to the Town.

ⁱⁱ Highly praised for his work during the cholera of 1834. In 1855, his MD dissertation was on Asiatic cholera. He was a Burgh magistrate and died in 1864.

ⁱⁱⁱ He had gone bankrupt in 1877 possibly the reason for the move to Inverness.

History of Highland Hospitals

as trustees. There was provision for six trustees elected from the contributors but, after a time, none put themselves forward. From then on, the Dispensary seems to have been largely financially secure although it continued to receive voluntary donations.⁴

As the table on the previous page shows, out-patient numbers declined in the 1840s but had increased to around 12 per week by the 1860s. Thereafter, they rose fairly quickly reaching a peak of well over 70 per week by the mid-1890s although numbers then fell away - a trend apparent across Scotland. After the 1912 Insurance Act, the number of patients reduced as many were referred to their panel doctorsⁱ and the number of vaccinations had declined in common with elsewhere. However, there were still many uninsured people - women, children and the poor - many of whom presented with diseases of a 'serious and urgent nature'.⁵

The main work of the Dispensary continued as before but it began to increase its facilities and range of treatments. In 1904, of the 1433 cases, 495 (34%) received medicines as recommended by the patient's doctor. The rest were treated directly by the resident dispenser. In 1912, 75% of patients were seen by the medical attendant who also made over 800 home visits in cases of 'grave illness'.⁶

The range of treatments at the Dispensary increased. From at least 1909, J Allan operated a dental service making around 200 extractions p.a. From 1911, it housed the Burgh's new TB dispensaryⁱⁱ with Dr LMV Mitchell, the authority's TB officer, in charge and, from then, he was also the Dispensary's medical attendant. In 1896, Dr J Wilson Black opened

ⁱ The Act provided medical benefit to all employed persons and voluntary contributors earning less than £160 p.a. (but not their families). It was supervised by Scottish Insurance Commission and administered by local committees which maintained a list (panel) of doctors to whom insured people were allocated.

ⁱⁱ They paid the Dispensary £50 p.a.

History of Highland Hospitals

an eye dispensaryⁱ in the Old Free North Manse at 99 and 103 Church Street which, in 1912, he transferred to the Forbes Dispensary. That year, he treated 255 cases. From 1913, Dr. J W Mackenzie ran an ENT clinic. These developments would have put the premises under some pressure and, in 1913, an extension was added with a surgery, dark room, patients' toilet and additional rooms to the dwelling house.⁷

Co-operation with other agencies continued. The Infirmary allowed the free use of its electrical room for examining patients. In 1912, over 90 child cases were sent to the School Boardⁱⁱ authorities for action and twenty eye clinic patients were referred to the Infirmary for treatment. The medical attendant worked closely with the Burgh's two jubilee nursesⁱⁱⁱ who, in 1913 and on his recommendation, made over 1800 home visits to serious cases - making daily visits to some.⁸

In 1926, the Burgh's child welfare centre was moved from the Bowmont Centre to the Dispensary^{iv} and was formally opened by Provost MacEwan. It occupied two rooms each afternoon when the Dispenser was off duty. By 1934, the clinics received over 50 mothers and over 60 infants per week and the premises were seen as too small by the Medical Officer of Health who wanted a purpose built centre but this did not happen and, by 1940, it was very overcrowded.⁹

In 1948, the new NHS brought in free prescriptions for all and, the following year, the trustees approached the new health board. They noted that the Dispensary had been superseded by the NHS - indeed they stated that no one at all had attended after 5th July 1948, the day the NHS started. They sought assistance to convert it to a convalescent home for

ⁱ From at least 1900, the Dispensary had provided eye lotions for many patients attending Dr Black's eye dispensary.

ⁱⁱ The 1908 Education Act required local authorities to medically inspect all school children. The 1913 Act required the authorities to also treat them.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Dispensary supplied them with bandages & medicine from at least 1904.

^{iv} It seems that the Burgh health visitor had already been located at the Dispensary for some years.

History of Highland Hospitals

Inverness and stated that Isobel Fraser Home managers had agreed to run it alongside their own. However, the Board's architects estimated it would cost £8,000 to convert it and would produce a maximum of eight beds which was not cost effective. The scheme was abandoned and, in 1953, the trust was changed to allow its resources of around £14,000 to form the still active Dr Forbes Trust which provides grants to local people towards the cost of medical treatment and equipment, convalescence, food, clothing and travel expenses to visit sick relatives. In 1955, the building was sold by public rroup (auction) to the Red Cross which occupied it until 2014. It continues as offices and is still called Forbes House.¹⁰

Medical Attendants¹¹

Post holders are shown where known but the record is incomplete.

1832	Dr Rankin (until 1833) and William Welsh Forbes (until 1837).
1837	Daniel Cormick appointed first paid medical attendant at £25pa.
1837-41	Possibly has a paid medical attendant. Dr Thomas Mackintosh and William Fraser, medical student, are mentioned in 1840.
1843	Dr Chisholm, Dr Manford and Dr MacDonald.
1844	Dr Chisholm and Dr Manford.
1858-54	Dr Walker.
1854-	Dr James G Mackenzie.
1850s-64	Dr ?William Welsh Forbes. Likely to have been frequently MO.
1864 - 7	Dr Campbell (died 1867).
1868	Dr Stewart.
1873-6	Dr Clark.
1876	Dr DF Mackenzie.
1891	Dr Wilson Black.
1894	Dr Lang.
1899-1911	Dr John MacDonald and Dr Lang essentially alternate years.
1911-40s	Dr LMV Mitchell. ⁱ
1917-19	Dr FM Mackenzie (LMV Mitchell at war).

ⁱ Dr LMV Mitchell OBE was the son of Alexander Mitchell resident dispenser to the Forbes Dispensary. He lived at the Forbes Dispensary and ran the Burgh TB Dispensary from there.

History of Highland Hospitals

Additional specialist Medical Attendants¹²

1909-22	J Allan, Dentist	Later at the Infirmary.
1912-27	J Wilson Black Physician, Eye Diseases	Also at the Infirmary.
1913-27	John W Mackenzie ENT	Also at the Infirmary.

Resident Dispensers¹³

1836-62	Hugh MacRae	Resident porter/ attendant (died 1862).
?-1869-81-?	Sergeant Henry Ferrier	Resident porter/ attendant.
1884-89	Alexander Mitchell	Died in 1889 at Dispensary.
1889-10	James A Mitchell	Son of Alexander. 17 years old in 1889.
1908-38	Anna B Mitchell	Sister of the above.
1938-45-?	Jeanette J Petrie	Daughter of former Provost.

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